

Turning the Tide

COMMUNITY BASED FISHERIES MANAGEMENT
PROTECTING THE POOR AND THE ENVIRONMENT



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The Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM-2)¹ project is attempting to turn back the tide of years of environmental degradation in Bangladesh by conferring the responsibility for looking after inland fisheries resources to those whose lives depend on them. The principle is simple - hand over management of water bodies such as *beels*², floodplains and rivers to community groups and they will see to it that these resources are managed sustainably and equitably so that future generations can depend on them in years to come.

In practice, it is a complex process - one which requires major shifts in long-held policies and principles by the government, intensive community development work with a range of NGOs and other stakeholders and the social empowerment of some of Bangladesh's most vulnerable citizens, the poor fishing community.

Through a community based approach, groups of poor fishers are now practicing sustainable fisheries management by creating sanctuaries, protecting against illegal and destructive fishing and banning fishing during the spawning season in project water bodies.

1. The CBFM-2 project is the 2nd Phase of the Community Based Fisheries Management Project, implemented by the Department of Fisheries, in partnership with the WorldFish Center and 11 NGOs.

2. Lakes or depressions in the floodplain.

Access and Responsibilities

Over a ten-year period, the CBFM project managed by the Department of Fisheries, in partnership with the WorldFish Center, and 11 NGOs³, has established community control over 116 water bodies. These are spread over 48 *upazilas* (sub-district) in 22 of the 64 districts in Bangladesh and include closed *beels*, open *beels*, floodplains and rivers. Around half of these water bodies are government owned and leased to the community groups whereas the rest are on private land or open access rivers. Over 130 officially recognised, poverty-focussed, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are involved in the management of these water bodies. However, in return for access, the CBOs must embrace the principles of sustainable fisheries management.

3. Banchte Shekha, BELA, BRAC, CARITAS, CNRS, CRED, FemCom, GHARONI, Proshika, SDC, SHISUK

A typical sign board indicating that this water body is being managed under the CBFM project. Similar sign boards can be found in other CBFM water bodies in rural Bangladesh.

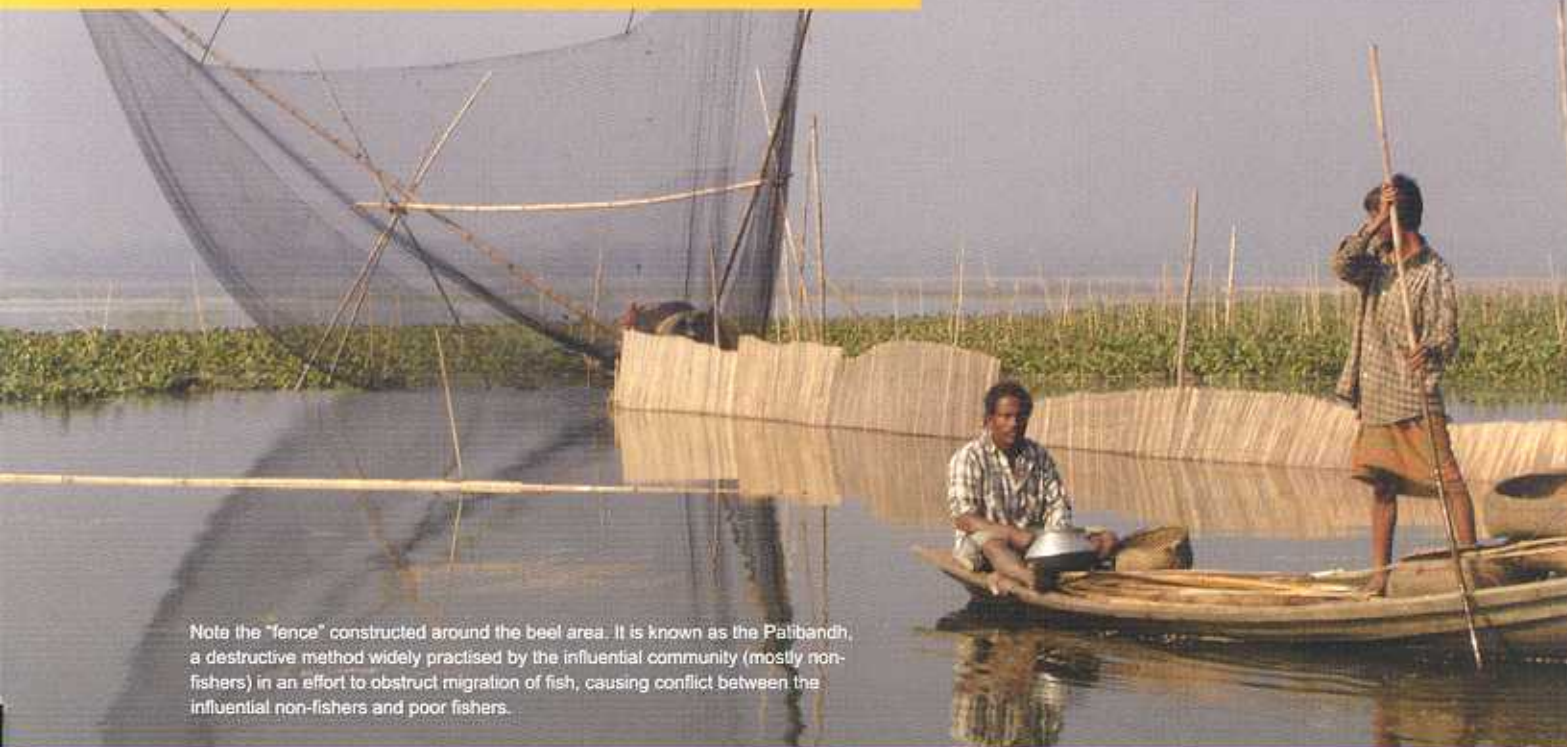


One of the main actions of CBFM-2 has been to establish fish sanctuaries - no fishing zones where a proportion of the fish in the water body is allowed to stay safely even when surrounding water levels are at their lowest. In floodplain areas, these might be excavated ditches whereas in *beels* and rivers, it is a demarcated section with red flags and filled with branches or tree roots, accompanied by a signboard declaring that fishing is completely banned in the sanctuary. A total of 164 fish sanctuaries covering over 91 hectares of water area have so far been established in 81 water bodies. As well as contributing to increased production, fishers are very happy to see fish species appearing once more when it was assumed that they had disappeared forever. These include valuable species such as *meni*, *pabda* and native *pangas*.



One of the fish sanctuaries found along the Titas cluster in Nabinagar of Brahmanbaria district. Titas Cluster comprises ten water bodies, mainly river sections and adjacent beels, all clustered under one management.

Another conservation measure is to stop fishing during the breeding season, usually for a three-month period - April to June each year. Of course this leads to hardship amongst households that depend on fishing for their livelihoods, so the project includes a credit component supporting the development of alternative income-generating activities.



Note the "fence" constructed around the beel area. It is known as the Palibandh, a destructive method widely practised by the influential community (mostly non-fishers) in an effort to obstruct migration of fish, causing conflict between the influential non-fishers and poor fishers.

A third responsibility which falls on the new guardians of these water bodies is to exercise control over the use of particularly harmful fishing practices. Examples are the use of fishing gears such as small mesh monofilament gill nets (locally known as current net or *jal*) which captures all sizes of fish at once, the construction of fish fences which disrupt natural fish migrations and the widespread practice of fishing by draining water completely from a water body.

Along with other measures such as re-excavating channels linking water bodies to canals and rivers, the communities have had a remarkable degree of success in applying these simple principles, and, in return, the amount of fish being harvested and the diversity of fish species being caught is growing at most project sites.



An estimated 1.2 million of the rural population are directly employed in the fisheries sector and around 12 million people indirectly earn their livelihood from fisheries related activities. Nutritionally, fish continues to provide about 60 percent of the total animal protein intake for the rural households.

A Pro-poor Approach

Bangladesh has always been able to count on its fish stocks to support the livelihoods of some of its poorest citizens. While the traditional fishers were typically low-caste Hindus, they have been joined by many poor Muslims displaced from other sectors of the economy. Although fisheries production is growing rapidly in Bangladesh, most of the recent gains have been in the development of freshwater aquaculture and shrimp farming.

Comparatively little attention has been paid to inland fisheries resources but this is where the majority of poor fishers make their living. The CBFM approach depends on engaging men and women from the poorest households in an area and imparting the skills for them to be able to organise and run community groups. The result is empowered citizens who can withstand the pressures from local elites who would like to regain control of fisheries resources.



Women attending a micro-credit meeting, usually facilitated by partner NGOs where different project issues are also discussed;

Gender Dimensions

It is not easy to involve women directly in fishing activities in Bangladesh - social conventions dictate that Muslim women are not seen beyond their homestead - unless they are truly destitute. Nevertheless the project has been able to demonstrate that women can organise and operate fishing activities in a predominantly Hindu area in south-west Bangladesh. In other areas, women have played a key role in the project through enterprise development, net mending or fish processing.

Of course women also exert strong pressure on their men-folk to respect the responsible fishing practices advocated in the project. In addition, it has been noted in several project areas that the enhanced social interaction caused by the project has resulted in greater respect being shown to women and a safer environment has been created allowing women and children greater freedom to move around.



WorldFish staff and partner NGOs constantly seek local knowledge from the project beneficiaries. This facilitates in deciding the type of training or credit assistance needed by the beneficiaries.

Partnerships

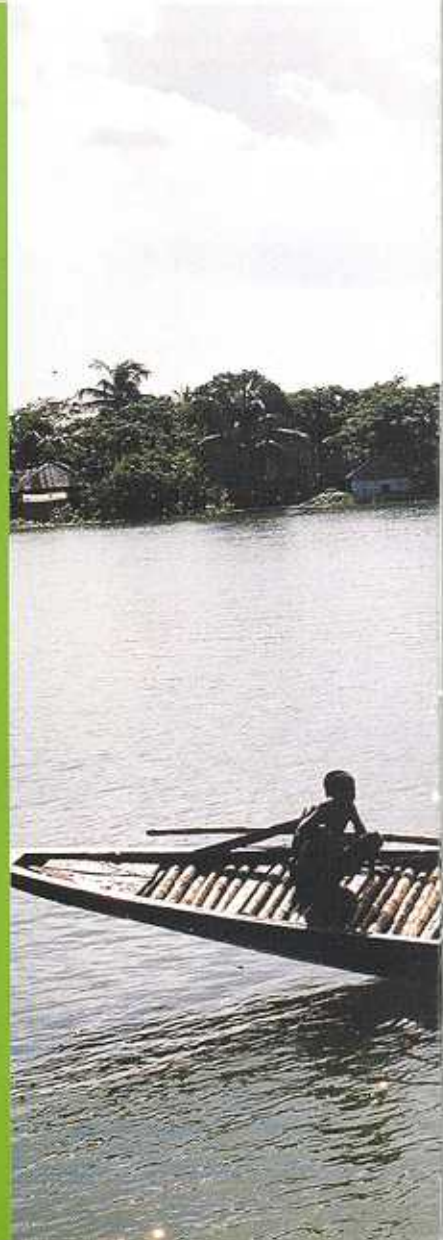
While the main principle of the project has been to create sustainable community groups capable of managing fisheries resources, this could not have been achieved without the support and collaboration of a range of project partners. Each of these partners has played their part in contributing towards the project outcomes.

Everyone would like to see an end to exploitative fishing practices and for most community group members, being given access to fisheries that were previously denied to them is such a strong incentive that they willingly observe and enforce improved management procedures.

The Bangladesh Government (the Department of Fisheries, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, local administrations) is now convinced that community management of inland fisheries resources is the way ahead. It is impossible for them to improve the resource through the traditional route of enforcement of fisheries regulations so community involvement should be a win-win strategy. The other side of the relationship is that community groups need to be able to seek advice from the Department of Fisheries on sustainable management options for their water bodies.

Most of the NGOs involved in developing the project community groups are interested in providing further support to them in the future, either through credit or specialised advice.

Throughout the process of project implementation, there has been a very positive attitude from the partners based on the fact that the overall principle of the project - the establishment of sustainable, community managed fisheries - is clearly the right thing to do for these communities and for the country as a whole.



Hopes and Fears

Although the project has successfully tested a range of approaches to community management of fisheries at a range of sites, the longer-term future for some of the CBOs is uncertain. Project funding from DFID ends in early 2007 by which time the CBOs will have to manage with their own resources. They should still be able to get technical support from the Department of Fisheries and NGOs may still operate credit programmes.

The resource base available at each site varies tremendously, from very productive stocked *beels* where community group members have already been able to transform their lives, to sites where any change in yields will be incremental at best. At the less productive river and floodplain sites, the project is asking a lot of the fishing communities who could well say: "Why should we forgo fishing opportunities when our non-project neighbours will be the ones who benefit?"

There needs to be a critical mass of similar interventions managed on a watershed rather than a water body basis. A promising sign is that a number of groups have convinced non-project communities to establish sanctuaries in adjacent water bodies.

Many people have expressed concern about the likelihood of CBOs being taken over by influential people, thereby losing their pro-poor approach - the greatest danger of this will be at productive sites. Also the complex nature of rural societies can result in splits and factions developing through time, particularly if the financial performance of the venture fails to meet expectations. This will be especially critical in open *beels*, which are subject to a government lease, and leased river sites where there are few opportunities for their management committees to organise group fishing activities to cover the cost of the lease.

Despite these concerns, the approach is so popular that it seems to be gaining a permanent foothold in the mix of approaches that are used to manage aquatic resources in Bangladesh. CBFM principles have been incorporated into new official fisheries strategies and there is an obvious opportunity for expansion of the CBFM concept across the inland fisheries sector in Bangladesh. However, it will still require the commitment of significant resources to implement its expansion. Community development requires long-term support from community developers. Legal support is absolutely essential to avoid becoming bogged down in a quagmire of litigation from aggrieved former users of the water bodies. Community groups need to have the opportunity to develop the linkages amongst each other and with other key partners to ensure their future. All these will take time and the achievements so far should be considered as no more than a promising start.





Sustaining inland fisheries resources through community-led fisheries management will simply mean sustaining fish for livelihood, for food and for better health of the community.



Addressing Poverty and Environmental Sustainability

The main conclusion that can be taken, after ten years of research by the WorldFish Center on CBFM projects in Bangladesh, is that community based fisheries management is working for most of the 23,000 direct participants who have invested their time and effort in project activities. Many have improved their livelihoods through the project and fisheries have improved, both in terms of production and sustainability.

What this means is that community based fisheries management approaches offer a way to help poor people while simultaneously addressing environmental sustainability - they offer the hope that despite the pressures placed on aquatic resources in a crowded and rapidly developing country such as Bangladesh, it is possible to halt and even reverse environmental degradation while reducing rural poverty.

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